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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ACCRA 002269

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SUBJECT: GHANA AND THE 2008 ELECTION: THE OPPOSITION NDC

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Classified By: PolChief Scott Ticknor for reasons 1.5 d and e.

1. (C) Summary: Ghana's main opposition National Democratic Congress (NDC) party plans to choose its presidential candidate for the 2008 election by January 2007, probably in the scheduled December party congress. The front-runner is two-time candidate John Atta Mills. Four others are also in the running: Edward Annan (a private business executive), Ekwow Spio-Garbrah (Director General of the Commonwealth Telecommunication Organization), Alban Bagbin (Minority Leader in Parliament) and Mahama Iddrisu (a former Defense Minister and advisor on Governmental Affairs). The party suffers from financial difficulties and significant internal friction, including the loss of some key leaders to the new, spin-off Democratic Freedom Party. Once a candidate is selected, the party campaign will likely highlight alleged governance and economic failings of the ruling NPP party. End summary.

The Aspirants

2. (C) To date, the five NDC aspirants are:

Professor John Evans Atta Mills: Former Vice President and the party's 2000 and 2004 candidate, Mills will give the contest his third shot. Mills won 44.32% of the popular votes in the December 2004 presidential elections. He combines credibility, easy manners, an engaging (though not particularly charismatic) personality and tested leadership skills. Mills has strong national name recognition and appeals to many parts of the party.

Edward (&Eddie8) Annan: Annan is a private business executive whose interest in the presidency surprised many in the NDC. The anti-Rawlings media continues to speculate that he is the choice of Mrs. Rawlings. Annan has been a major fund-raiser for Mills and the NDC and has the tendency to play to the base. He has been repeatedly investigated for business malpractice and has a rocky relationship with the media, which has heavily criticized him over the past five years.

Alhaji Mahama Iddrisu: An Ahmaddi Muslim and a former Defense Minister and advisor on governmental affairs, Iddrisu continues to show interest for the top spot in the NDC. He is

widely popular in the party (especially in the north). He has not been active in party politics since the NDC congress in 2002 and is seen as more conservative than Mills and other aspirants. As an Ahmaddi Muslim, some in the party are concerned that he may not appeal to some Christians, as well as Ahlussuna and Tijanniya Muslims outside the NDC.

Alban Bagbin: Minority Leader in Parliament, Bagbin is a star from the most impoverished region in Ghana, Upper West. His leadership of the minority caucus in Parliament has won him considerable admiration within and outside the NDC. He is a Catholic but a high-profile extra-marital affair with his sister-in-law will likely hurt him significantly in his candidacy for the NDC ticket. Bagbin has been very low profile for several months.

Ekwow Spio-Garbrah: Spio-Garbrah was a loyal supporter of Mills in the 2000 and 2004 races and has been very involved in the NDC. He served as Minister of Education and Ambassador to the United States under former President Rawlings. Nonetheless, he appears to have offended some section of the party, including his peers. Fellow party supporters cringed when Spio-Garbrah recently claimed that the NDC lost the 2004 election because of the quality of its leadership. Some NDC activists also accuse him of abandoning the party to take up his current appointment as CEO of the U.K.-based Commonwealth Telecommunications Organization.

Challenges for the NDC

13. (C) The party leadership seems committed not to interfere in the smooth selection of a credible standard bearer. The NDC's main challenges at this point are:

Internal Divisions: Intra-party competition is stronger than
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in earlier election periods, and other candidates may still emerge. The NDC had only two presidential contenders in the run-up to the 2004 election and one (Rawlings) in the 1992 and 1996 elections. The current divisions stem in part from concerns about Mills, electability, since he has lost two successive presidential bids.

The Rawlings Factor: A wildcard is the role of former President Rawlings. He played a significant, visible role in the NDC's 2004 campaign, as well as in the 2005 party congress. He is a polarizing and unpredictable figure. While still hugely popular among some NDC loyalists, Rawlings scares away other would-be supporters and could be a net liability. Aspirants to the presidency will try to gain his support while distancing themselves from being seen as a Rawlings man. Rawlings' role has already split the party, leading to the formation of the Democratic Freedom Party (DFP).

The DFP: Former NDC Chairman Dr. Obed Asamoah, a longtime nemesis of J.J. Rawlings, recently broke from the NDC to form a new party, the DFP (reftel). Asamoah has already succeeded in wooing several prominent, disaffected NDC officials into his new party and is expected to increase political poaching efforts in the coming year, including from the NPP. He may also try to convince some NDC MPs likely to lose at the primaries to run as independent candidates, further undermining the NDC. Some anti-NDC media speculate that 22 NDC Members of Parliament may soon resign from the party or cross the floor of Parliament to join the DFP.

Finances: The NDC has some financial problems which, when combined with poor media skills, have so far resulted in lackluster campaigns by NDC aspirants. The party will have to convince potential financial backers that it can win the Castle, despite past losses and lingering concerns among many in the public about a return to NDC days.

¶4. (C) Although the 2008 election is still far away, electoral politics is already in the air. It is encouraging to see new NDC leaders emerge and so far Rawlings, role has been constructively low-key. NDC contacts are quick to point out that they won 44% of the popular vote in 2004, retain a base in large parts of the country, and won a string of recent by-elections, even increasing their margins. They remain a formidable force in a race which once again will be essentially two-sided (most smaller opposition parties are bit players, while the long-discussed merger of the Nkhumist CPP and PNC parties appears unlikely).

¶5. (C) The NDC will focus more than ever on issues and the NPP,s performance in the run-up to the 2008 campaign. These will include corruption, narcotics scandals, and other governance issues. The NDC would vigorously oppose (possibly with violence) any NPP effort to implement the controversial Representation of the People Amendment (ROPA) bill, giving expatriate Ghanaians the right to vote. However, the NDC's main focus will likely be on bread-and-butter performance issues like unmet salary demands, petroleum price hikes, and the rising cost of living. It promises to be an interesting political year in Ghana.

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